

The Role of Affective Filters in Oral Communication: A Case Study of Pakistani Students and Teachers

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Abstract

This is a qualitative and exploratory study. The main aim of the researcher was to find out the impact of affective filters and language input in second language communication. The study was carried out in the Pakistani context. English is taught as a subject at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of Education. The fear of English as alien language acts as a strong barrier for learning of English communication skills at every level. The population of the study comprised of Pakistani students studying in an English medium high school. The students and their English teachers got an opportunity to visit a native English country for a period of six weeks. The researcher interviewed 2 teachers and 5 students in order to explore the causes that helped them to improve their oral communication skills in the second language (SL). The students and teachers identified three factors as affective filters inside the classroom, which act as affective filters and barriers to improve SL. Researchers analyzed these interviews and found that there are three main reasons due to which students feel difficulty in SL learning inside the class, which are lack of motivation, shyness, and fear of making mistakes. On the contrary, in native English-settings (providing massive input), unavailability of code-switching environment and motivational attitude of host families turned out to be major factors that acted as a catalyst in improving English communication efficiency of the exchange programme participants.

Keywords: *L₂ learning, input, affective filters, Pakistani classroom, natural setting*

1. Introduction

In history, English rulers enforced a foreign language in India, and this resulted in inevitable changes in the developmental history of the subcontinent. English was taught at educational institutes. In early stages, British rulers of the subcontinent used this language as a bridge to teach and implement British policies (Arshad, 2018). After the departure of English masters, the language maintained a prominent status in the region. With the passage of time, English as a language got the status of world's most powerful language and now in the 21st century, English is considered as *lingua franca* due to its prime importance. English is the language of the globalized world; it is the language of commerce, science, technology, literature, and industry in present times. Phillipson (2001) adds that English as a language is not a matter of superiority on demographic or geographical basis, rather it is more essential to know that it is the language of decision-makers; individuals who control the political and financial system of the earth and they are the most dominant individuals of the world. These communities control 80 percent of the world resources and these nations are obscenely richer (Phillipson, 2001, p. 189). It is believed that 85 percent of the world population can either speak or understand the

English language. In order to have access to newly produced information, journals, books, and international literature, having command on English has become a prerequisite. It has become the language 'of need', not 'of choice'.

Developing countries have adopted English either as an official language or a second language in order to have a familiarity with the language. Pakistan is a South Asian country where English is the second or third language of the educated class. It is taught as a subject at school and college level. Unfortunately, conventional methods of language teaching are used to teach English, which promote rote learning. Reading and writing skills are developed in teacher-centered classrooms. English speaking ability of the learners at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels remains an issue. When students go for higher education internationally, they face a great difficulty in communicating with native English speakers due to poorly developed listening and speaking skills. The high school students focus on writing skills, as they have to pass written exams for promotion in the next classes. So, rote learning is taken as the easiest option to memorize the content with or without conceptual understanding. Moreover, the English teachers, as well as students, use the choices of code-switching and code-mixing in classroom situations. This provides liberty to students so they do not strive to improve listening and speaking skills in English.

L₂ learning is different from L₁ learning due to various factors including the extent of language input (natural settings or artificial setting like classroom), critical age, plasticity of the brain and vocal tract, age factor, and willingness of the pupils. Unlike L₁, second language acquisition is a conscious effort; it needs proper instructions to learn the rules and grammar of the new language. The present study is an effort to see the grey areas due to which non-native English students and teachers feel difficulty in achieving proficiency in the English language. The study would also highlight the difference between learning English communication skills inside an average Pakistani classroom and native-English country (USA), and how these factors influenced speaking ability of Pakistani students and teachers. There is a need to adopt different methods in ELT teaching, which help to develop the English skills of Pakistani students and prepare our students to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Moreover, teachers should adopt new methods of teaching the second language in order to train our students and prepare them to meet challenges in academic and professional careers.

1.1 Aims and objectives

The study has the following aims:

- a) To identify the affective filters which act as obstacles in improving verbal English communication skills of Pakistani students inside the classroom.
- b) To see how native English country visit helped these students in improving the English proficiency of students.

- c) To suggest to ELT teachers different ways to help students to improve verbal-English communication skills.

1.2 Research Questions

- a) What kind of affective filters act as hurdles due to which students are reluctant to communicate inside the classrooms?
- b) How Pakistani students improved English speaking proficiency in international exchanges?
- c) What measures can be taken to improve English learning conditions in Pakistani classrooms?

1.3 Significance of the Study

At the elementary level, we generally see three types of institutions, viz. public schools, private schools, and *madrassa* schools. These three types of institutes generally represent the social stratification of the country. Public schools are economically affordable for the lower class and lower middle class. The students studying in these schools receive average education where completion of syllabus and teacher-centered classrooms are dominating. In these classrooms, teachers use conventional methods to teach English. The second category is private schools, which are affordable to people having enough resources to provide quality education to their wards. Except for a few brands like The City School, Roots IVY, Pak Turk Schools, Froebel's, and a few more, other street schools run as private schools are not making outstanding efforts to adopt new ways of teaching. The students coming out of eminent private schools are more competitive and eligible to adjust across the globe. The third and last are *madrassa* schools which have maximum student strength. The students in these schools get religious and contemporary education at the same time. The teaching methodologies are conventional, and very few of these students get a chance to avail of global scholarship facilities and find it too difficult to improve oral communication skills. It is very unfortunate that examination scores are considered the ultimate goal of learners and teachers both work together to earn good marks. The interactive and communication skills are ignored. As a result, when these gold medallists and high scorers compete for scholarships, they face major challenges due to poorly developed communication skills in foreign countries. Similarly, those who get admission or jobs in native English countries fail to adjust due to limited interactions with students and community and sometimes give up their careers. This study will coax academicians and policymakers to know how classroom learning and teaching work in real situations.

Most of the parents send their children schools, expecting that the child will get better education and improve English proficiency. Unfortunately, most of these parents are disappointed because students get very good writing and reading skills, but the speaking skills of students remain an issue. The present study is an effort to highlight a few grey

areas due to which students could not get English speaking proficiency. Studying a group of students who got chance to visit native English country provides a better sample to study. In addition, observation of teachers acts as an aid to identify loopholes in the classroom instruction.

2. Literature Review

In 1977, Dulay and Burt put forward a hypothesis named as ‘Affective Filter Hypothesis’. They explained that people with high affective filters have lower intake of language as compared to people having lower effective filter and greater intake. Later in 1985, Krashen incorporated this hypothesis in five input hypotheses. Krashen (1985) argued that people acquire second language only when affective filters are low enough to allow input ‘in’. In his studies, Krashen explains these factors as self-confidence, motivation, attitude, and anxiety. His main viewpoints are as follows:

- A raised affective filter can block input from reaching LAD.
- A lowered affective filter allows the input to “strike deeper” and be acquired.
- The affective filter is responsible for individual variation in SLA.

These affective filters act as hurdles in acquiring the second language. There are four factors that control affective filters in second language learning (Xiaoyan, 2009). Motivation is the first and most important factor, which has greater influence in controlling affective filters and improving second language acquisition. Gardner (1985) defines motivation as the extent to which the individuals work or strive to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity. Positive motivation helps the learner of the language to lower down affective filters and get better understanding of language. Negative motivation has a contrary effect on learning of language. Attitude of the learner is the second factor that influences L₂ language learning skills. Xiaoyan (2009) argues that attitude has three components, i.e. affect, cognition, and behavior. The language learners having a positive attitude learn language easily and show rapid progress. On the other hand, the acquirer of language having a negative attitude towards target language makes slow progress in getting language proficiency.

Anxiety is another factor that controls affective filters. Garden and MacIntyre (1993) explaining the cause of anxiety hold that “The situation requires the use of second language with which the individual is not fully proficient”. Test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and shyness affect L₂ learner’s efficiency. Self-confidence is the final and important reason which controls affective filters. People having self-confidence succeed more, dare to adventure, and can communicate in second language more efficiently (Xiaoyan, 2009). People having a lack of self-confidence are afraid of losing face and making mistakes.

The theories and ideas of Krashen (1985) were very helpful and influential in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The hypothesis mainly explains that language cannot be learned if a student is blocking the learning process. If the affective filters are high, the learning will be low and vice versa. In addition to the factors explained by Krashen, Ghazali (2006) includes quality and quantity of input, age factor, and limitations of classroom in second language learning. According to him, the age of learner has a reasonable effect on the learning capacity of an individual. The quality of input depends on the source from where student is receiving input. The L₂ speaker does not have proficiency like the native speaker and as a result the input is of average or below average quality depending on the person providing language-learning opportunity. The quantity deals with the type of vocabulary used by the source, including the intonation and grammatical accuracy of the language. Since the L₂ speakers have limited language skills, they repeat the same expressions and linguistic items during speech. As a result, the receiver rarely receives variety of expressions and learns what s/he receives. The output is dependent on the input. If input is better, output will also be good. The present study will explore how affective filters, input, and code-mixing influences language learner's proficiency in classroom and natural settings.

3. Method

Researchers used the qualitative approach for this study. Qualitative studies are considered better to have a deeper insight and subject interpretation of the context of the text, and it also helps to see themes and patterns in the discourses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

3.1 Population

The population of the study comprised of HIT education city students and teachers. HITEC is an average private school having students coming mostly from the lower or middle class of society. These students and teachers participated in US-HITEC exchange programme where they got an opportunity to go to the US and stay with the American host families for 6 weeks. It was a short duration programme where students and teachers of both countries got engaged in an online programme which later matured into an exchange programme. The USA government funded for the programme and the programme was conceived to provide education and cultural exchange opportunity to educators and students involved in the program. Three groups visited USA from 2010-2013. Each group had 20 students, 8 teachers, and 2 administrators. Each participant was living with a separate American host family and was attending American school to have a first hand experience of academic and cultural activities of US schools of Watauga County, NC. The interviews were recorded in 2013, a few months after Pakistani participants' visit.

3.2 Sample

The Researcher interviewed 2 teachers and 3 students. The students are studying at elementary and high level and this was the first foreign visit for all the participants including teachers and students. The number of participants is kept low in order to have a better understanding of the issue.

3.3 Research Tools

Semi-structured interview questionnaire was used as a research tool. There were two sets of questions, one for the teachers and another for the students. The questions can be seen in Appendix A.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 English Language as Lingua Franca of the World

The first question intended to know participants' views about importance of English as a global language. In response to this a student replied: *"I think it's important because today English is the main language of the world, so we should learn English in more proper way and we should communicate with one another in English at school"*.

For the same question, the second student shared the following:

"If we talk about English language, it is quite necessary for us. I am glad we are having plenty of academic courses in English language...there are professional jobs in English, so it is important. English is communicating language all over the world, its not only in Pakistan.,,"

4.2 Discussion 1

Students' responses show that they are aware of the importance of English as an academic and international language. They are also aware of the fact that English is the lingua franca of the globalized world. Though they never said it explicitly, but the students were well aware of the importance of English language. A student talked about different professional opportunities for people having good communication skills.

The purpose behind asking this question was to see whether students of 9th or 10th grade are familiar with the importance of English as the second language or not. Understanding the importance of English as the second language is the key motivating factor that helps students to have a positive learning attitude for this language. The responses of the students show that they recognise the importance of English as the second language and language of the globe.

4.3 Fluency and Affective Filters

In response to a question about how this international exchange programme influenced students' English speaking proficiency, here are two responses from students.

Before going to America, in our class, if I speak wrong English, my all friends laughed on me. But after coming from America, my fluency improved a lot. Now I can speak English fluently, correctly... so this programme helped us a lot. Personally, my proficiency level has increased by this. I am quite confident to talk in English now.

The adolescence is the age where affective filters of individuals are high because individuals' change biologically at this age of puberty. The shyness of children is maximum at this age of development. The shyness and fear of getting embarrassed in public and in front of others act as strong affective filters for students of this age. As a result, the students are in need of motivation to overcome filters in order to learn. But in this case, student shared that her friends laughed at her when she spoke wrong English. At this point, the role of teachers becomes important where they should provide a moderate classroom where everyone gets motivated. Students shared, this international exchange programme had an effect on the second language learning, especially communication skills. In detailed talk, students shared that there should be exchange programmes like this in future as well. Students were very much impressed by the culture and shared that they have plans to go for study abroad programmes if they got opportunity.

4.4 Discussion 2

Students felt that their second language learning got better in natural settings (i.e. native English country). Firstly, the classroom acts as a site where affective filters are high. This issue is more prominent in case of language fluency and English speaking in front of the class. As shared by a student in the above paragraph, when he spoke wrong sentences, his friends laughed at him. Student's shyness acted as an affective filter, and, student being egocentric, tried to avoid humiliation. Lack of motivation from the class-fellows inside the class acts as hindrance and students remain reluctant to speak in front of class fellows. Secondly, native English settings act as a stimulus for second language learning. The environment has its own role to play. As Vygotsky holds, it is the conceptual shift from the individual to collaboration, social interaction, and sociocultural activity (in Guvain & Parke, 2010). As learners socialize and interact with others, the positive response and motivation from the environment acts as stimuli and students feel more competent and learn more. In these situations, affective filters are low and learning can be enhanced.

In natural settings, the environment aids students in language learning. The students, while living at home with native English speakers and having full exposure to English language, do not get any chance of code-switching to L1. These factors lower down affective filters and language learning becomes involuntary. Now learning of language is passive and curiosity to know more and more about new culture acts as a motivational factor.

4.5 Teaching Strategies and Student Role

The researcher asked the teachers about their experience of going to the USA, visiting schools there, especially, how the experience influenced their teaching methodologies for teaching English. Here is a valuable response from one of the teachers. She is an English teacher and teaches students at elementary and secondary school.

We use lecture method to teach students. I have seen in the US that people go for activity-based learning. Whatever they are making them learn, they engage them in activity. For example, what I had been doing in novel reading that I ask them to read to text and I keep on explaining the lines. Whereas what they do, they ask the students to read the novel at home and present summary in front of the class. And usually they ask the students to read whole novel. Although I can't make my students to read whole novel in duration of one week, at least I ask them now to read one chapter of the book, and come and present summary in front of class. In this way they get proficiency, they get confidence and at least they speak.

4.6 Discussion 3

There are many points highlighted by the teacher in the above statement. Firstly, she admitted that language teachers are still using conventional ways of teaching language. In the 21st century, having bombardment of new strategies, technology and innovation, teachers are reluctant to adopt new learning methodologies. It is due to this reason that our language classrooms are boring and they do not have anything new for students. The teachers are reproducing the same group of students who have nothing new to offer except learning second language, as they do not have any escaper from it. Traditional lecture method, which I believe is designed for adults, is used in language classrooms. The teacher is authority, and students are afraid of speaking in front of the teacher (both in the first and second language). Teacher in the above statement showed evolution by making class more interactive for students after visiting USA.

Secondly, teaching strategy has been improvised. The teacher reports how she transformed her teaching method after the visit. She made students speak through activities including presentations. They might add new dimensions when they compete to excel other class fellows. Secondary class students belong to the age group in which one likes to do experimentation, and, I believe, this transformation will act as a positive sign for English learning ability and proficiency development of students.

4.7 Code-switching and Input

The researcher asked the teachers how this exchange programme has affected students when it comes to second language learning. Here are the views of teachers.

The students have learnt a lot. Obviously, through reflective sessions they have tried to convey and share with fellows, but their experience is obviously more than that. They have learnt many things from their society, their education system, from their culture, they groomed their personalities.”

Another teacher shared that:

Not necessarily we specify some time... During my activities, I encourage them to speak, even if they are speaking wrong English, I don't discourage them... if someone laughs, I ask them don't laugh, at least he is speaking... I ask them that do not switch, do not switch to Urdu language, and they always hesitate. They say teacher I will not be able to make my point. I say, I will be able to understand, I will try my best to understand.”

4.8 Discussion 4

In the first statement, the teacher talks about reflective sessions. Reflective sessions are held on the last day where students reflect on their experience in front of fellow students and teachers who could not get opportunity to visit the USA. Reflective sessions allowed students and teachers to share what they learnt and experienced culturally and academically. The teacher acknowledges the fact that reflective sessions were only a pinch of what students experienced in US, but she shared that students were very confident while sharing their experience.

In the second statement, the teacher shared that after visiting US, she revisited her teaching methodologies; now she encourages students to speak in front of the class. If other students make fun of speaking students, it is teachers' job to discourage such attitudes. Language input difference inside the classroom and outside the classroom has a great impact on fluency of second language learning. As Ghazali (2006) discusses the difference of input in case of L₁ and L₂, it is true in this study. Classrooms have limited exposure of students to L₂ whereas native English countries have a bulk of input, and it helps learners to acquire language consciously and unconsciously.

The third thing highlighted by the teacher in statement two is the benefit of code-switching inside the classroom. When students feel that they would not be able to convey their meaning accurately, they use crutches of native language, and this becomes a hurdle in acquiring proficiency in second language. Natural settings do not allow people to switch language, and it is possibly a good reason, which helps learners to grasp L₂ efficiently.

5. Findings and Conclusion

The study aimed at identifying the factors which act as a hurdle in improving the oral communication skills of the learners. It explored how the input is important in developing language skills and what reasons lie behind poor oral communication skills of the students, especially English communication skills in this case.

In this study, researchers found how affective filters influence second language acquisition. Language input is very critical, and at the same time, teaching practices are pivotal in motivating students to learn second language efficiently. Traditional methods of teaching the second language, discouraging attitude of fellow students, and absence of motivation from teachers hinder successful second language learning. There is need that teachers incorporate new methods for teaching language and make classroom more interactive and appealing for students. Teacher motivation has very important role in lowering down the affective filters of students. Code-switching to L₁ can have a negative effect on L₂ learning, so teachers should encourage students to avoid code-switching in L₂ classrooms. Researchers feel that changing teaching methodologies for L₂ learning will have an exemplary effect on second language learning of students.

Moreover, the input of language is very important. ESL teachers, who got their education in Pakistan, put a lot of emphasis on grammatical skills of the students; authoritativeness also acts as the main affective filter for the learners. The learners are reluctant to communicate in class because they do not want to get embarrassed in front of the fellow students. As a result, they give secondary or nil importance to communication in classroom settings. They come, hear lectures, and stay quite. This demotivated classroom acts as an affective filter and has adverse effect on the English language learning of the students. Krashen believed that second language learning is similar to first language learning where learners make mistakes; they receive a lot of input and give adequate output. The natural order hypothesis presented by Krashen argues that second language should be taught like the first language. It is a gradual process, and learners attain proficiency slowly just like the child who is acquiring the first language.

Additionally, the 21st century demands the teachers to be less authoritative in the classroom. The revised pedagogic skills are presented where critical thinking, practical application of knowledge, and innovative skills are very important to compete. The 4 c's of 21st century skills enlists communication skills amongst the most valued skills in today's age. The English teachers should be aware of contemporary trends in education and should encourage the learners to interact inside the classrooms. Proficiency and competency of language are two different dimensions of English language learning. Proficiency can be achieved through practice only. Pakistani students rarely get an opportunity to polish English communication skills outside the classrooms. The teachers have to seriously think about different ways of improving the language skills of the

students. Policymakers and curriculum setters should have an updated curriculum as per the current needs. A better-developed curriculum, frequent teacher trainings of English teachers, and student-centered classroom settings can have a beneficial effect on academia.

Having good speaking skills is a need of the time. With great advancements in research and education, outcome-based education (OBE) is trending in academia. The classrooms are the places where teachers are preparing learners for global citizenship. The students have more opportunities to avail national and international scholarships in study programmes. International exchange programmes like YES Programs, IREX, Fulbright and HEC scholarships provide an opportunity to students to compete for academic excellence and get best education across the world. There are six-week programmes, bimonthly programmes, annual programmes, and long duration programmes for nonnative English students and teachers. Some of these exchange programmes offer students to live with native families (native English host families in this case). Students participate in these programmes, and at the end of these exchange programmes the oral English communication skills are enhanced. Having better oral and written communication skills are critically important in this age of technology and research. Siddiqi (2007) argues that Pakistani teachers use conventional teaching practices, which have a direct influence on communication skills of students. According to him, Pakistani English teachers are more focused on completion of syllabus, irrespective of students' learning. On the contrary, Pollard (2002) claims that a teacher should be concerned about aims and consequences of teaching. The teacher is accountable if students do not learn well. The teachers should focus on developing conceptual understanding of the students as well. Pollard further adds that teaching is a cyclic process where teachers keep on refining teaching methodologies in order to facilitate the learners.

Reflective teaching can be a successful tool for teachers. The idea of reflective teaching was put forth by John Dewey at the start of 20th century and later on researchers like Schon (1987) and Killen (1995; 2003) further elaborated the idea. In order to improve the teaching of English, teachers have to be more reflective about the classroom happenings, learning styles, and contemporary trends in teaching. The teachers should integrate the latest teaching techniques in order to facilitate the students. Recent pedagogical approaches like cooperative learning, reciprocal learning, and collaborative learning can play a decisive role in enhancing the conceptual understanding of the student, and it can have a great impact on the improvement of oral communication skills of the learners.

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